

2005

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Recommended Citation

Quayum, Mohammada, Confessions of a liminal writer: An interview with Kee Thuan Chye, *Kunapipi*, 27(1), 2005.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss1/15>

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Abstract

Kee Thuan Chye was born in Penang, Malaysia in 1954. He started writing poetry and drama in the early 1970s, while he was still an undergraduate student of Literature at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and had numerous radio plays broadcast on RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) during that period. He also wrote plays for the stage, including *The Situation of the Man who Stabbed a Dummy or a Woman and was Disarmed by the Members of the Club for a Reason Yet Obscure, If There Was One* (1974) and *Eyeballs, Leper and a Very Dead Spider* (1975).

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Confessions of a Liminal Writer: An Interview with Kee Thuan Chye

Kee Thuan Chye was born in Penang, Malaysia in 1954. He started writing poetry and drama in the early 1970s, while he was still an undergraduate student of Literature at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and had numerous radio plays broadcast on RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) during that period. He also wrote plays for the stage, including *The Situation of the Man who Stabbed a Dummy or a Woman and was Disarmed by the Members of the Club for a Reason Yet Obscure, If There Was One* (1974) and *Eyeballs, Leper and a Very Dead Spider* (1975).



However, Kee's move to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital and premier city, in 1979, where he now lives, marked the beginning of a new phase in his writing that culminated in his agitprop play *1984 Here and Now*, first performed in July 1985 at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, he has composed *The Big Purge*, performed at the Essex University Theatre, England, in May 1988, *We Could **** You, Mr Birch*, first performed at the Experimental Theatre in Kuala Lumpur in June 1994, and *The Fall of Singapura*, which has not been staged yet. Moreover, Kee is the author of two volumes of prose: *Old Doctors Never Fade Away* (1987) and *Just In So Many Words* (1993). His poems have been published in numerous anthologies and journals at home and abroad.

As former Literary Editor of the Malaysian English daily, *New Straits Times*, and current Associate Editor of the leading Malaysian newspaper *The Star*, Kee is one of the most prominent English-language journalists in the country. He was the recipient of a British Council Fellowship in 1987 and Australian Cultural Award in 1994. In 1998, he was invited as a guest writer to the Melbourne Writers Festival, the Brisbane Writers Festival, and Spring Writing in Sydney. In 2001, he was invited to the inaugural Standard Chartered International Literary Festival in Hong Kong. He has been a judge and regional chairperson of the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Kee is also a deft actor and stage director. His acting credits over the last 25 years include roles in the films *Entrapment* and *Anna and the King*. He played a major role in the long-running TV series *City of the Rich*, and the role of Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* on stage to unanimous acclaim in 1989. He has also directed about a dozen plays for the theatre.

This interview was conducted via e-mail in November 2004.

* * *

MAQ: *Tell us something about your ancestors who first came to Malaya. How did they negotiate between the two cultures/worlds, following their migration?*

KTC: I'm afraid I have no record of this.

MAQ: *Has the cultural dislocation affected/enriched your imagination in any way?*

KTC: Yes. It has certainly made me question my identity as a person and as a writer. Malaysia is still a young polity, having become independent only forty-seven years ago with a baggage of diverse races and cultures. The Malaysian identity is still amorphous. People like me from immigrant backgrounds although born here but not long after Independence have had to struggle to find a sense of belonging, and through the decades, with the formulation of ethnic-biased policies, the struggle has been made harder. We've had to put up with being marginalised and being less privileged than the Bumiputras. We've even had to suffer the insult of being called 'pendatang' (immigrant). I personally experienced the adverse effects of such institutionalised racial discrimination when I was denied a tutorship position after completing my first degree although I was top of my class. That deprived me of the opportunity of pursuing my Masters because I could not afford to continue my studies without a job.

Today, the racial divide is still there. At its recent general assembly, UMNO, the dominant Malay-based ruling party, unveiled what it called its 'Malay Agenda'. It defies good moral sense that in this day and age, in a multi-racial, plural society that is being urged by its leaders to work towards national unity, there is such an agenda. It makes mockery of what the leaders are exhorting. They seem to speak with forked tongues. Imagine the Whites in, say, Australia declaring a 'White Agenda'. Even Malaysia's leaders would have taken exception against such a notion, as it seemed to have done so against Apartheid in the 1980s, ignoring the fact that they were practising a form of Apartheid at home.

Given the yet unstable state of Malaysian identity, the challenge for Malaysians is contributing ideas towards its evolution. Writers can give flesh to some of the ideas. My imagination is stirred by issues like what it means to be Malaysian, how this nation can rise above racial considerations

to embrace all its denizens and observe the time-honoured values of justice and fairness. My contention has always been that if we all helped to build this house which is Malaysia, why must some of us still be considered tenants?

The cultural make-up of my being is even more complicated. Despite being ethnically Chinese, I am culturally far from being one, having been educated in English which brings with it the assimilation of second-hand Western culture. I suffer from cultural anomie being unable to read and write Chinese and unschooled in the Chinese cultural traditions. I speak very basic Hokkien learnt from my parents. I think in English. My sensibilities are more Western than Asian. I might have steeped myself in learning the Malay language and assimilating Malay culture, but that was forestalled by the English education that instilled a false sense of superiority. In the '60s, non-Malays by and large didn't take Malay seriously. We were still suffering from the colonial hangover. There wasn't a strong sense of nationalism among non-Malay youths. We drifted with the postcolonial tide of uncertainty and apathy.

MAQ: *It was a terrible injustice that you were not accepted as a tutor in the department only because of your ethnicity. However, I believe, you did get an opportunity to pursue graduate studies later, but perhaps by then you had lost your interest in teaching.*

KTC: The initial intention of pursuing my Masters was not motivated by an interest to teach. Similarly, when I eventually did it at Essex University in the late '80s, becoming an academic was not on my mind. In fact, at the time, I had the option to study film-making in London instead, also to be funded by The British Council. But after much agonising, I chose to go to Essex because I had dependents and could therefore not be away for two years on the film-making course without income. Essex was only for nine months. Although the Essex experience has its good and memorable moments, I often look back with regret at the road not taken. A diploma in film-making could have taken me on a different, perhaps more fulfilling, career path. This is another life-decision that I made wrongly.

MAQ: *How did you come into writing — English writing? What motivated you to write?*

KTC: I think and read in English. I speak English ninety-nine percent of the time. Naturally, I took to writing in English. The motivation to write came at an early age for me. It was of course imitative. Around the age of nine, I was already scribbling stories. I was encouraged by an uncle whom I occasionally visited. He would glance at what I'd written and say general things to encourage me. In school, I showed my stuff to a few classmates. I was especially inspired after I saw the first James Bond movie, *Dr No*. It got me reading all the Bond novels by the age of ten or eleven. And I naturally wrote my own Bond novel! Around the same time, I was also

inspired after watching a school production of *As You Like It* at which I was besotted by the girl who played Rosalind. I embarked afterwards on the ambitious task of writing my own Shakespearean play!

In secondary school, I wrote virtually in competition with a classmate. We showed each other what we wrote. In retrospect, I think he wrote better. But I don't think he pursued writing in his adult years. He became a pharmacist. He became a 'drug pusher' while I continued to be a pen pusher. The pains of growing up cried out for expression in poetry and my adolescence was engaged in that genre.

MAQ: *Is there any other memory from childhood that you would like to share with us? Any particular memory that you think might have shaped/influenced your personality/sensibility?*

KTC: There are too many! They all helped to shape me, so it's hard to zero in on one particular memory.

MAQ: *Please explain to us your process of writing. Do you write with a particular audience in mind: Malaysian/ASEAN/Western? Or do you write primarily for yourself — to meet your personal sense of accomplishment, and for the joy of doing something creative/constructive?*

KTC: I started out writing for myself but my perspectives have now changed. I write for basically a Malaysian audience because this is the audience I want to reach out to. The issues I address are derived from my Malaysian experience and they are meant to be shared, first and foremost, with my fellow citizens.

MAQ: *In that case, I am afraid, your audience is likely to be rather small, given the Malaysian habit of reading, and reading English books in particular. Isn't that disheartening for you as a writer?*

KTC: Not really. Of course it would be nice to be read internationally, but one should not gear one's writing in that direction simply to fulfil that purpose. I've seen the results of Malaysian and Singaporean novels that pander to a Western readership. Often, they end up hawking exotica and the language gets stilted. Ultimately, what determines whether a piece of writing can cross borders is its intrinsic value, which would include factors like truthfulness and authenticity.

I have read the opening sequence of my novel-in-progress, *A Sense of Home*, in Malaysia and abroad, at Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Britain, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Hong Kong, Singapore — all to multi-national audiences — and it has gone down well every time, despite the fact that it is about characters living in Penang and the narrator speaks in the Malaysian brand of fractured and ungrammatical English. And I certainly did not aim it at an international readership when

I wrote it. When it was included in the anthology *New Writing 10*, published by Picador, I received a letter from the chief editor of Headline, an imprint of Hodder & Stoughton in the UK, asking if I could show her what else I had written.

MAQ: *How much of your writing is conscious and how much of it is spontaneous? Do you believe in the importance of editing/revising a piece of literary work or do you think it should be left entirely to the 'truth of the moment', as editing may affect the work's 'authenticity'?*

KTC: Every work needs to be revised and edited. And I say that not just because I'm an editor! Sure, there will be parts that encapsulate 'the truth of the moment' and these may not be touched, but it always serves the writer well to re-look at what he's written in his first draft to improve on it, plug the holes, see things he did not see the first time round. Once you've written the piece, it's good to stand back and see the larger picture before signing it off as a completed work. Authenticity is never compromised by revising and editing.

MAQ: *Who are the major influences on you, if any, as a writer/playwright? Have you been influenced by any of the local/regional writers or playwrights as such?*

KTC: When I started writing plays as an undergraduate, I was influenced by the Absurdist, primarily Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter. *Waiting for Godot* had a tremendous impact on me then. It made me look at the world, at life, in a way that was different from what I had perceived it to be. The Absurd plays came to me through a frequency I could tune into because they reflected my own inner turmoil at the time and my questioning about existential issues. I was not as familiar with local or regional writers. Those that I read were not so compelling in their vision as to have a strong effect on me. Later, in the 1980s, as I became more aware of the importance of reclaiming my Asian identity, I borrowed elements from Asian myths and traditional theatre for my plays and some of my poems. The play *1984 Here and Now* (1984) incorporated elements of the *Wayang Kulit*. And *The Big Purge* (1987) again had *Wayang Kulit* as a central motif. My writing has become increasingly eclectic, and this is best exemplified in the multi-faceted nature of *We Could **** You, Mr Birch*.

MAQ: *Please explain for our readers what Wayang Kulit is and how you incorporated elements of it in your plays?*

KTC: *Wayang Kulit* is shadow puppetry, part of the traditional cultural repository of Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Indonesia that have been influenced in the faraway past by Hindu culture. The stories of *Wayang*

Kulit are mainly derived from the great Hindu epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. They are performed by a *dalang* (puppeteer) who is so versatile that he plays all the characters. Imagine a Pixar animated film with only one person doing all the voices. A small group of musicians play the wind instrument *serunai* and percussion accompanies the *dalang* when he sings and also to punctuate the dramatic moments.

I incorporated these elements in 1984 *Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* to depict the shadowy world of manipulative powers. In a sense, ruling politicians are like the *dalang* who is all-powerful because he dictates the story, the script, the performance. He manipulates. He theatricalises reality. What you see is what he conjures. The *Wayang Kulit* is for me, therefore, a powerful metaphor of power play.

MAQ: *Would you also tell us of your memories of the racial riots of May 13, 1969 — the incident that has come to shape Malaysia as a nation as it is now.*

KTC: I was fifteen and in Penang when the riots broke out. As the population was predominantly Chinese, Penangites did not feel the sting of the conflict as sharply as in the metropolitan centre of Kuala Lumpur. There were curfews. We felt the tension. News of Malays fighting Chinese and killing each other was shocking. We had lived together harmoniously, at least in Penang. There had been no sign of antagonism. Of course, the factor of ‘Otherness’ was there in our interactions but we were familiar with each other. We could throw racial slurs in jest at each other and be confident that neither party would take offence. We never felt, ‘Ugh, he’s Malay (or Chinese or Indian) so better not have anything to do with him’. We played together, we laughed together.

Families that had television sets probably felt the effects of the riots more. My family only had radio. We listened keenly to the news of developments. We heard lots of rumours, some probably unfounded, like Malay soldiers shooting innocent Chinese. Our home was away from the town centre so that kept us remote from outbursts of violence, but there was one harrowing experience for us. A few days after May 13, there was a constant banging on our back door, which was made of thin metal, for fifteen minutes or so. We were so terrified we didn’t know what to do except fear the worst. Fortunately, the banging stopped.

When Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman spoke to the nation on TV eventually, we were stunned because he was in tears. In those innocent years, we had respect for the nation’s leader. We realised the extent of the damage inflicted on the national psyche, but we had no inkling of the repercussions of the declaration of Emergency and the setting-up of the National Security Council headed by Tun Abdul Razak, the Deputy Prime Minister. We had no idea that the damage would radically change the

whole pattern of life in the country and negatively intensify the idea of 'Otherness' in all of us. To this day, relations between Malays and non-Malays have never been the same.

MAQ: *Since you are both a creative writer and a journalist, would you consider these two interests conflicting or complementary?*

KTC: Conflicting. My biggest mistake in life was going into journalism. The writing mode for a journalist is different — objective, factual, logical. I see that as being antithetical to creative writing. Besides, a journalist deals with words the whole day at work. After work, he may not have much energy left to deal with words as a creative writer. As a result, the creative writing is neglected. I have since been advising aspiring writers to banish all thought of becoming full-time journalists if they want to pursue creative writing.

MAQ: *How would you consider the overall atmosphere in Malaysia vis-à-vis literature and writing?*

KTC: It is not a conducive atmosphere. We do not have a big reading public. Our desire for intellectual engagement is low. V.S. Naipaul observed that when he was here and he's right. Our schools condition our young minds into becoming submissive beings. They are not challenged to question. They are instead encouraged to be obedient and subservient to the powers that be. When they get to university, they are handicapped. They become lost when the academic spoon feeding stops. They have not been intellectually primed in their school years to deal with the approach and materials of higher education. Their main objective is reduced to merely passing examinations.

The Malaysian mentality is still feudal despite our avowed aspirations to be modern. There are too many contradictions in our edicts and the conduct of our public life, the codes we have to observe. These restrain us rather than propel us forward. In such a clime, literature struggles to find readership. Other factors work against it — the emphasis on Science and Technology, the rise of materialism that accompanies newly acquired wealth. Shopping is the number one pastime of Malaysians. Culture is not high on the priority list; the Budget allocations for culture are minuscule compared to those in other fields.

MAQ: *What are some of the challenges you experienced personally, when you started out to write in the late '70s, in the wake of the new language policy in the country?*

KTC: I felt marginalised. I felt writing in English didn't count for anything because there was a literature policy that recognised only literature written in Malay as National Literature. That written in other languages was considered Sectional or Communal Literature. This was demeaning. As demeaning as the National Culture Policy which stated that it would be

based on Nusantara culture (which embraces Indonesian culture, mind you!) and 'suitable elements' of immigrant culture. What did they mean by 'suitable elements'? Who would decide what was 'suitable'? Why go afield to Indonesia to incorporate its culture into ours when what is home-grown, albeit non-Malay, is subject to a test of suitability? I felt alienated as a member of the 'immigrant' race. I wasn't made to feel that my writing counted for much. Such discouragement made me question what I was doing. I even felt guilty and inadequate writing especially in English, the colonial language, in a time of rising Malay neo-nationalism. I didn't feel Malaysian writing in that language.

MAQ: *One of the criticisms against Malaysian literature generally, and literature in English in particular, has been that it is too ethnocentric — often Malays writing about the Malays, Chinese about the Chinese, and so forth. Is that a fair criticism? However, having said that, I notice that you made an attempt to empathise with the Malay culture in We Could **** You Mr. Birch. How did you accomplish that? Did you engage in a concerted research on the indigenous Malay culture and history before you embarked on the play?*

KTC: It is fair criticism, but as the Malay playwright Syed Alwi once said, a writer should write about his own race so that other races can understand it better. He does have a point. To me, it's not important if a Malay writes only about the Malays or an Indian writes only about Indians. The work must arise naturally. It would be a mistake to resort to contrivance merely to include other races. *We Could **** You, Mr Birch* called for a multi-racial cast of characters. It was natural for that to be. I didn't consciously set out to write a play that would have the various races featured in it. I can empathise with Malay culture because I have been in direct contact with it especially after I moved to K.L. in the late 1980s.

MAQ: *Your plays are often political but you also address certain social issues in your writing. What in your opinion is the best way for Malaysia to forge a national identity that will be inclusive as well as horizontal, rather than exclusivist and vertical, in its formation?*

KTC: National identity cannot be forged. It has to evolve organically. The best that can be done is for the authorities to not impose artificial constraints on its evolution. No National Culture Policy, no literature policy, no New Economic Policy. The Malays needed help to develop their economic status but this could have been done without resorting to exclusivist means that lower the national morale, demean meritocracy, and alienate races. There could have been a separate affirmative action programme that did not disrupt the flow of public life. We could have achieved much more as a nation today if not for exclusivist policies. Such achievements would have

made us prouder as a nation and enhanced our sense of national identity. This is a much better way than imposing labels and claiming superior privilege for one race over other races. The show of national unity in celebrations like those on Independence Day is contrived. The authorities have to strive to urge Malaysians to raise the Malaysian flag in their homes. But this is all display, trappings.

MAQ: *Although I feel that a positive intervention from the government, emphasising equality of the races and universal social justice would help to heal the fractures caused by the British divide-and-rule policy during the colonial period. After all, the races were not allowed to intermingle freely by the British for many decades. Isn't that the main source of misgivings between the races that we see now, and shouldn't the government provide leadership in ejecting that seed of doubt from the minds of its people?*

KTC: The main source of misgivings between the races was the policy formulated after 1969. That was when racial discrimination was institutionalised. It led to racial polarisation and distrust among the races. The British did adopt the policy of divide-and-rule but they did not prohibit free intermingling among the races. Which is why up until 1969, as I said above, the different races could interact harmoniously on a personal level without as much discrimination and suspicion as after 1969.

MAQ: *What is your view of the future of Malaysian literature in English? How can it attain the potency and dynamism that we see, for example, in the literature of neighbouring Singapore?*

KTC: Singapore respects literature in any language written by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you'd have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It's a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called.

MAQ: *But frankly, the younger writers have not accomplished much. There is plenty of talk about writing among these writers, but if you come to think of it, very little of actual writing has been realised by them. Why this disconcerting gap between their performance and promise?*

KTC: I don't think the younger writers in the English language have not been writing. They have. Some of them are quite prolific. And popular. In the area of drama, Huzir Sulaiman and Jit Murad have created an impression. In literature, I could think of Dina Zaman, Lisa Ho King Li, Jerome Kugan.

They may not be so well-known because Malaysian publishers are not keen to publish local writing unless it has the potential to sell. Someone like Amir Muhammad resorts to writing for media publications and making his own films.

MAQ: *Would you like to say a few words about the theatre scene in Malaysia? How is the theatre in English faring vis-à-vis Malay theatre? What kind of support/incentive is there from the government for writers/actors/theatre in Malaysia?*

KTC: Theatre is an activity that does not enjoy massive support in most parts of the world. It would seem that people involved in theatre are doomed to struggle, sometimes in vain. This is absolutely so in Malaysia. Theatre practitioners in English don't dream of getting Government support. There have been instances of one or two Government officials (in the Culture Ministry) who showed empathy for Malaysian theatre in English and did what they could to ease its passage but these have been few and far between. By and large, if you want to put on a production, you have to go out and beg for money to finance your enterprise. This is not easy to come by. When economic times are hard, it gets harder. The Government did help when a few years ago, it moved to exempt theatre productions from having to pay the Entertainment Tax, which amounted to a hefty twenty percent on each ticket sold. This came about after years of struggle on the part of theatre activists to have the tax waived.

The Government makes it harder in the area of censorship. Scripts have to be vetted before they can be given a permit. Sometimes the vetting authorities require the excision of 'sensitive' or 'unsuitable' parts in the script. It is all part and parcel of the contradictions inherent in the Malaysian ethos I alluded to above. There are too many constraints. We are afraid of free expression. It may damage our thin skins.

MAQ: *How has your writing evolved over the years? What are your future plans?*

KTC: I wish I could write more. I honestly don't think I have written enough. I blame that on my mistake of going into journalism and my own lack of self-discipline. Given my talent and output, I consider myself as nothing more than a minor writer in the larger canvas of Malaysian literature.

When you haven't written enough, you can't seriously talk about evolution in your writing. All I can say is that I am more considered now in my writing, less partisan. I'm no longer the angry young man of *1984 Here and Now*. I lost the words for poetry not long after I became a full-time journalist and if that's evolution, it gives evolution a bad name! I have a play brewing in my mind, a novel for which I have made copious notes but can't find a direction for, some short stories that appear amateurish, and an increasing inclination to write TV scripts and screenplays. There are plans. If only I had the time and concentration!